

# CONVERSION AND CONFLICT: RAISING THE STAKES

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Conversion and Conflict: Raising the Stakes**

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Contemporary research in therapy, communication studies and alternative dispute resolution has found that narrative is powerful and can be used to understand and mediate conflict (Clair et al, 2014; Collins & Clark, 1991; Fisher, 1984; 1985; 1989; Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Leung, 2009; Shen, Ahern & Baker, 2014; Winslade & Monk, 2000). Though conversion experiences are often focal points in narrative, little scholarship has been dedicated to studying the phenomenon of conversion, particularly conversion narratives, in relation to interpersonal conflict. Using interdisciplinary conversion studies, contemporary, Western conversion narratives and specific conflict examples, this thesis will define conversion, show its relationship to external conflict and will propose an integrated approach to conflict resolution methods, specifically to narrative mediation, that better addresses the sources of interpersonal conflict.

## **DEDICATION**

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the greatest of peacemakers and the inspiration for this work.

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

As human beings, conflict is an inevitable experience, one that both requires something of us and has the capacity to change us. Interpersonal conflict and the phenomenon of conversion are two types of conflict common to the human experience. Interpersonal conflict takes place externally between individuals, while conversion, or intrapersonal conflict, takes place within an individual. Even though one of these forms of conflict is internal and the other manifests itself externally, I believe them to be the same phenomenon. Narratives of conversion experiences and narratives about the resolution of an interpersonal conflict have the same rhetorical contours; they relate similar experiences and use similar narrative features and language. What happens to conflict resolution methods when we think of conversion and interpersonal conflict resolution as one and the same experience? I believe that it raises the stakes of interpersonal conflict. Beneath custody disputes, marital issues and relational tension, there is much more going on within the individual. To resolve an interpersonal conflict is to require the individual to internally change in some way. In essence, resolution requires some level of conversion. With this in mind, I will use narrative in the first chapter as a lens for examining both experiences, first analyzing how narrative relates to conflict and people's understanding of themselves and then using narrative to explore the phenomenon of conversion. In Chapter II, I will use the information from the previous chapter to develop my definition of conversion. Chapter III will compare specific narratives of conversion and interpersonal conflict resolution to show their similarities and the relationship between both experiences. Lastly, in Chapter IV, I will flesh out the implications that this relationship has on contemporary conflict resolution methods.

## **Narratology**

### *Foundations*

Both communications scholar Walter Fisher and rhetorician Kenneth Burke believed in the power of language to move people to action and belief, as well as its ability to shape a person's existing worldview. These men form a foundation for narrative theory and create a convincing argument for the power of narrative, especially as it relates to human relationships and conflict resolution. Burke laid the groundwork for Fisher's narrative paradigm with his dramatism and identification theories. According to Burke, dramatism is the theory that language is the basis of all human action and he uses drama to evaluate human motivations, particularly through the use of a dramatistic pentad (Burke, *Grammar* x, xvi). This pentad is composed of the following points: Scene, Act, Agent, Agency and Purpose. Because people tend to privilege one or two of the points on the pentad over the others, the points can be compared to one another in ratios and used to trace motivations for the things people say (Griffin 287). Knowing which point someone privileges and how that motivates what they say is a significant step towards understanding someone else, communicating well and resolving conflicts.

Burke's theories about the guilt-redemption cycle and identification are foundational to this thesis. Burke defines man as "the symbol-using inventor of the negative separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making goaded by the spirit of hierarchy and rotten with perfection" (Burke, *Language* 16). While this definition accounts for the invention and use of language and the ways that it separates humans from animals, the following two phrases within this definition are worthy of greater attention: "inventor of the negative" and "rotten with perfection." By inventor of the negative, Burke means that man has the ability to define objects

in terms of what they are not, which leads to the concept of “rotten with perfection.” “Rotten with perfection” describes man's ability to conceive of perfection based on examples of imperfection in the world in combination with his inability to attain perfection, which leads to a universal sense of guilt. According to Burke, rhetoric is an attempt to expiate this guilt through an act he called “victimage,” in which a speaker blames personal or universal ills on someone else. In this sense, there is a guilt-redemption cycle; guilt is felt until a scapegoat can take it away. The notion that people speak to relieve a sense of guilt by blaming someone else is not specific to public discourse, but can also describe the way that people talk about their experiences with interpersonal conflict. Taken together, Burke’s definition of man and theory of victimage speak to the human desire to verbally address and eliminate sources of guilt, such as conflict, whether that means blaming it on someone else or truly resolving the issue.

Another important concept within Burke's theories is “identification,” which he equates with the term consubstantiality, meaning the shared similarities between two different things (Burke, *Rhetoric* 21). Burke would say that two distinct objects or people can experience identification through the things they have in common; successful persuasion depends on developing identification between the speaker and the audience by emphasizing their common ground. When identification takes place, a person is able to see a given situation from the position or viewpoint of someone else. Burkean identification does not assume that people will wholly change their views, choosing to stand permanently in what was originally someone else’s viewpoint on a topic, but it does assume that a deeper understanding of underlying commonalities between different people will be formed. Though Burke often draws conclusions from and applies his theories to public speeches and discourse, this thesis will use Burke’s



definition of man and the concepts of victimage and identification as a foundation for understanding conflict narratives and conflict resolution methods.

Building on Burke's theories, communications scholar Walter Fisher posited that humans are storytellers, first and foremost, who understand and articulate their lived experience through narrative, which he describes as, "a theory of symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" (Fisher, "Narration" 2). His narrative paradigm is a view of human communication that provides a method of discerning good stories from the bad ones; this method uses what Fisher calls a logic of good reasons, or "those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical" (Fisher, "Toward a Logic of Good Reasons" 378). According to the logic of good reasons, a good story worth believing in or acting upon will satisfy the two criteria: narrative fidelity and narrative probability. Narrative fidelity refers to a story's truthfulness, values, and reasoning. Narrative probability refers to the formal features of the story, whether or not it is coherent, has a consistent plotline, has recognizable themes and characters, etc.

His definition of man as a storyteller is central to this thesis, because the connections between conversion and interpersonal conflict will be made through the use of narratives. Though his narrative paradigm won't be used as explicitly as his definition of man, it is important to understand the way that people perceive "good" stories and "bad" stories. In addition, Fisher notes the importance of telling stories "that do not negate the self-conceptions people hold of themselves," because at that point, communication breaks down (Fisher, "Narration" 14).

### *Contemporary uses of narrative*

In order to truly understand the power of narrative, it's necessary to discuss some of its practical applications. Of all the areas in which the narrative theories have been applied, organizational communication, therapy and conflict resolution methods have been affected the most. One of the most important uses of narrative in organizational communication is a practice known as Appreciative Inquiry, which is used to generate innovation and growth within organizations (Gergen 115). Appreciative Inquiry gets the employees of an organization to tell positive stories about their work experience, which then get shared in the organization's meetings. Themes are taken from these stories and used to guide the future plans of the organization. This process not only leads to greater employee support of new policies, but according to Dr. Andreas Granhof Juhl, it can "impact organizational circumstances, such as levels of competence, economy, sick leave and employee understanding of organizational culture" (81).

Within the realm of therapy, narrative is used to heal patients. Narrative therapy is a method created by Michael White and David Epston in which patients' stories about their experiences are used to reveal, unwind and resolve the issues that they are bringing to counseling. In his book *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counselors*, counselor Martin Payne reviews the following steps of the narrative therapy process: telling the story (a problem-saturated description), naming the problem, externalization, relative influence questioning, deconstruction of unique outcomes, taking a position on the problem, use of therapeutic documents and telling/re-telling the story. The goal of this process is to help the patient see that there is more to their life story than just the "problem story" that they are dealing with and living in; specifically, this involves getting the patient to focus on unique outcomes, or "significant memories which

contradict or modify the problem-saturated, dominant story” (Payne 13). Payne writes, “[Narrative therapists] encourage the untypical to be considered in great detail because it is through the untypical that people can escape from the dominant stories that influence their perceptions and therefore their lives” (7). In this way, the patient gradually builds a new, more complete version of their story that includes those unique outcomes, which allows them to overcome their present problems. A significant milestone comes at the end of therapy when the patient gets to invite people that are important to him or her to the last session and tell their new story, one that includes but isn’t dominated by the story of the problem. This moment is essential for maintaining the progress achieved through therapy (Payne 16-17).

Conflict resolution methods, such as mediation, have also benefitted from narrative theory. There is something about narrative that creates a neutral context, which diffuses the need to come up with a counter-argument or defend oneself against attack. It provides a method of giving an opinion or asserting an identity, even controversial opinions and identities, in such a way that doesn’t lead to violence. As Shen says in “Stories that Count: Influence of News Narratives on Issue Attitudes,” the content of narratives tends to be someone’s personal experience, which is difficult to dispute and attack. Identification with and empathy for the character(s) in a story can increase positive thoughts and reduce counterarguments (101). Research has shown that framing events in a narrative format can powerfully affect people’s attitudes toward those events and the way the events themselves unfold (Shen, Ahern & Baker, 2014; Leung, 2009). Not only that, but narrative provides a unique avenue through which to nonviolently sort out conflicts.

Of particular relevance in this field, as well as to this thesis, is a conflict resolution method created by John Winslade and Gerald Monk known as Narrative Mediation. It is a method of alternative dispute resolution that is more concerned with the stories people tell about a conflict than it is with the actual events of a conflict. In their book *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution*, Winslade and Monk describe the narrative mediator's task: "...The success of a mediation might depend not so much on the extent to which a mediator can separate the story of the dispute from the realities or facts, but on the extent to which the mediator can work with the parties to create an alternative story" (53). The mediator adopts a naïve stance and asks genuine questions about each party's experience with the conflict situation. As the mediator listens to each party's version of the conflict story, he tries to pinpoint the areas where each party feels the most threatened by the other and the reasons that they feel threatened. Taking these things into account, the mediator will ask the parties to think about one another apart from the actual conflict and ask them to search for unique outcomes, moments when their interactions didn't seem tainted by the conflict situation. By separating from the conflict in this way, the disputing parties can then begin to work together and seek a practical resolution. By the end of a successful mediation process, both parties will have a greater understanding of their own motivations, as well as an understanding of the other party's motivations. Both parties have adjusted their perspectives of each other and are capable of seeing one another apart from the conflict situation that they experienced.

In a similar vein are organizations like the Public Conversations Project and Christian Peacemaker teams, both of which use conversations and stories to bring peace to places injured by conflict and violence. The Public Conversations Project is an internationally recognized

nonprofit organization, which seeks to use dialogue to broaden people's horizons on controversial topics ([publicconversations.org](http://publicconversations.org)). Public Conversations Project hosts forums and workshops to teach people how to ask honest questions, give genuine answers and talk to someone in a way that protects the conversation from rhetorical and discursive violence. Though the purpose of these forums is not to change people's minds, the forums' atmosphere is very conducive to identification and therefore, to positive change. Christian Peacemaker Teams, on the other hand, bring dialogue with them into areas where victims of violence and conflict are located. They try to generate peace through conversations between the victims and the "victimizers" ([cpt.org](http://cpt.org)).

## **Conversion**

### *Conversion in narrative*

Narrative is not only a lens for understanding and mediating interpersonal conflict, but it is also the most commonly used medium for relating a conversion experience. With Fisher's understanding of man as a storyteller, it's no wonder that a disruptive and significant event, such as a conversion experience, would find its way into someone's personal story. In his article "Religious Conversion as Narrative and Autobiography," Bruce Hindmarsh writes, "In the sharply etched pattern of life pre-conversion and post-conversion, we are also able to see that the narrators are doing something more than simply reporting data; they are telling a story" (344). Conversion is a common feature in autobiography, because as a significant change in a person's life, conversion also represents a significant change in an autobiographical text. In his book *Sacred Estrangement: The Rhetoric of Conversion in Modern American Autobiography*, Peter A. Dorsey asserts, "Conversion marks change (or difference) in a literary text, and this in part

explains its frequency in autobiographical writing. Since life is a chaotic sequence of events, moments of conversion help the autobiographer plot significant changes textually” (4).

Conversion, however, is more than just a helpful narrative feature; the conversion experience is the centerpiece around which an entire life narrative can be structured.

When expanded fully, Fisher’s assertion that people understand and articulate their experience through stories means that conversion narratives and autobiographies don’t just recount past experiences; they shape the way the author and the audience understand those past experiences.

In *Language and Self-Transformation*, anthropologist Peter Stromberg explains the dual nature of the oral conversion narrative and asserts, “Language is meaningful to speakers in part because it may reflect a situation beyond the event of speech, but also because it creates a situation in the event of speech...the conversion narrative itself is a central element of the conversion” (3).

Similar to narrative therapy, the telling and re-telling of one’s conversion story helps cement the effects of that experience and bring about fresh insights.

### *Interdisciplinary approaches to religious conversion*

With the help of narrative, the phenomenon of conversion has traditionally been studied as a religious experience. In *Understanding Religious Conversion: The Case of Saint Augustine*, Dong Young Kim gives a concise summary of the ways that religious conversion has been studied in the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology and theology. He also includes Dr. Lewis Rambo’s interdisciplinary model of religious conversion, which draws on the findings of all four areas of study. It is important to understand these perspectives, because they are the foundation upon which to develop a new definition of conversion.

Psychology approaches religious conversion in terms of internal processes, which can leave the convert in either a better or a worse mental state than before. Among the positive psychological views are those that explain religious conversion as the unification of the divided self and the development of identity. Psychologists William James and Edwin D. Starbuck both assert that conversion is a regenerative process in which the unhappy, unfulfilled parts of a person, the internal crises and sin within a person are transformed into happy fulfillment and internal unity (Kim 20-23). Similar to James and Starbuck, psychologist Kenneth Pargament also agrees that conversion results directly from and solves some form of internal stress or crisis. In “A Study of Religious Change Among College Students,” Pargament found that the results from a study of 130 college students was fairly consistent with his definition of conversion, “a radical change in the self in response to either emotional turmoil or enduring stress through which the self becomes identified with the sacred” (162-173).

Still others view conversion as a natural and important part of human development in which a person finds their true identity. In *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development & Christian Faith*, James W. Fowler defines conversion as “a significant re-centering of one’s previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one’s life in a new community of interpretation and action” (281-282). In this view, conversions are personal changes that lead to individual growth and the development of healthy relationships. This view also incorporates narrative language like “master stories” into its definition of conversion, which further emphasizes the connection between narrative and the phenomenon of conversion.

One negative psychological perspective, which stems directly from Freudian psychology, holds that religious conversion is regressive and damaging. In defining religion as an illusion, Freud asserts that religious conversion is an attempt to resolve the Oedipus complex and is “a matter of surrendering to the father’s or Father’s will” (Kim 18). Freudian psychoanalysts like Leon Salzman believe conversion to be regressive pathology, often leaving the convert emotionally and mentally ill. Despite their differences, however, both the positive and negative psychological perspectives on religious conversion explain it in terms of internal causes and transformations.

Sociology studies religious conversion through the lens of external factors, primarily social deprivation, institutional recruitment and other social influences. Creating a relationship between religious conversion and a sense of deprivation (whether economic, social, ethical, etc.), strain theory states that “persons engage in religious affiliations in order to satisfy conventional desires that unusual personal or collective deprivation have frustrated due to this inequality” (34).

Though they don’t believe that religious conversion completely resolves the sense of deprivation, sociologists Charles Glock and Rodney Stark do assert that a move toward religion rises, at least partially, out of a sense of deprivation (249). The strictness and persistence of institutional recruitment methods of churches and other religious organizations also play an important role in the sociological approach. For Dr. Nancy Ammerman, conversion is itself a recruitment process in which converts gradually adopt the ideologies and lifestyles of their specific religious community as a result of interactions with other members (Kim 43). Similar to institutional recruitment, the social influence that a community of believers has on a potential convert is a significant catalyst for religious conversion. In their article “The Sociology of Conversion,” Dr. David Snow and Dr. Richard Machalek hold that religious conversion is tied to learning the



behaviors of the believing community (182-184). Overall, sociology understands religious conversion to be a result of external influences resulting in lifestyle and behavioral changes.

Anthropology approaches religious conversion from a communal standpoint, tying conversion and culture closely together. Most of the anthropological approaches see religious conversion as a response to changes in a culture/community's external environment. For example, Dong Young Kim cites the work of anthropologist Charles Kraft, who studied the religious conversions of the Higi people in Africa. The Higi people had forsaken their traditional, tribal religion and had adopted Christianity even though they had been in close contact with both Muslims and Christians. Kraft asserts that pre-existing, tribal conflicts with the Muslims in the area combined with a fear and respect for Christian missionaries led the Higi people to reject Islam and convert to Christianity (Kim 51-52).

One anthropological approach understands religious conversion to be a result of revitalization movements, or "deliberate, conscious, organized efforts by members of society to create a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 264). Anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace likens a society to a living organism, saying "that a society will work, by means of coordinated actions...to preserve its own integrity by maintaining a minimally fluctuating, life-supporting matrix for its individual members, and will, under stress, take emergency measures to preserve the constancy of this matrix" (265). Revitalization movements, which are said to lead to religious conversion, stem from cultural stress and the fight to maintain social homeostasis. Since religious conversion is so closely connected with cultural change in the anthropological approach, it is logical that religious conversion could be understood as a result of these movements. From an anthropological

perspective, religious conversion is most strongly influenced by cultural factors or changes in one's surrounding community.

Lastly, theology has studied religious conversion in terms of human brokenness and a need for the direct influence of a living God. Paul Tillich, author of *Systematic Theology*, asserts that, "existence is estrangement...man as he exists is not what he essentially ought to be. He is estranged from his true being" (2: 45). This estrangement manifests itself as a disconnection in relationships with self, others and the divine and can be overcome through conversion (Kim 61). In other words, conversion relieves estrangement and is a result of God's grace. Gustavo Gutierrez and Ronald D. Witherup understand religious conversion to not just be a change that affects the individual believer but a change that also affects an individual's relationships with others; the change that takes place within a person should naturally have external effects (Kim 79). In this perspective, a conversion leading to love for God ultimately leads to a love for people. Though each approach emphasizes a different part of conversion, all theological perspectives place importance on God as the catalyst for conversion, whether that happens through the authority of Scriptures or through direct influence.

Dr. Lewis Rambo's model stands out among these different approaches to religious conversion, because it attempts to combine aspects from all disciplines. His model has 7 stages: Context, Crisis, Quest, Encounter, Interaction, Commitment and Consequences. Within the context of a person's life, a crisis will arise that will undermine "his or her fundamental orientation to life, raising deep questions about existence" (Kim 84). This leads into what Rambo calls the "Quest" stage, in which the person searches for answers and solutions to his/her crisis. The "Encounter"

and “Interaction” stages can be combined to describe both the environment and means through which a person finds answers and undergoes conversion. The last two stages, “Commitment” and “Consequences” are the aftereffects of conversion, the ways that the convert’s life manifests internal change externally. Rambo’s model bears certain similarities to the other approaches. For example, the Crisis stage is similar to psychological theory about unification and the divided self, and the Encounter and Interaction stages involve the external environment in ways that are similar to the sociological and anthropological approaches to religious conversion.

These various approaches lay the groundwork for further studies of conversion. Though the academic disciplines aren’t religious in and of themselves, with the exception of theology, they approach conversion in terms of religion. However, we will see that they contain common themes that lead to a more secularized understanding of conversion.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **TOWARDS A SECULARIZED CONVERSION**

Rambo's model of religious conversion acts as a stepping-stone toward a secularized understanding of the phenomenon of conversion. There are two common themes within these different approaches to religious conversion, which can be applied outside of the religious context: pre-conversion stress and post-conversion improvements in relationships and behavior. In psychology, the divided self represents a source of individual, internal stress for person, which can serve as a catalyst for conversion. In sociology, strain theory holds that people experiencing social stress, namely deprivation, will convert to a religion to fill that emptiness. In anthropology, Anthony Wallace's revitalization movements stem from cultural stress, which can lead to conversion. In theology, Paul Tillich's belief that conversion moves man from his previous state of estrangement and into a state of peace with himself, God and others is also a belief in conversion as a remedy to stress. Even Lewis Rambo's interdisciplinary model recognizes this theme by including "crisis" as one of the essential stages in the conversion process.

The second theme of post-conversion improvements in relationships and behavior also shows up in these approaches. Psychologists James and Starbuck cite that people became "consciously right, superior and happy" and had "resolved their sense of sin, dejection, confusion and depression through the conversion experience" (Kim 21, 23). Glock and Stark's sociological approach states that religious conversion helps people cope with deprivation by giving them a community; in that sense, they experience improved relationships with those around them, even

if the deprivation isn't completely resolved. Anthropologist Diane Austin-Broos attaches religious conversion to a new relatedness with others in culture. From the theological perspective, Gutierrez and Witherup's viewpoint is that conversion is never separate from external behavior changes, especially with regard to social justice and love for other people.

These two themes lead me to conclude that the phenomenon of conversion should not be limited to the religious context but should also encompass secular experiences. Conversion should be defined in such a way that it reflects this truth. With this in mind, this thesis defines conversion in two ways: as an experience with internal conflict and its resolution and as a shift in a person's "god-term." To illustrate my definition of conversion, I will draw on two conversion narratives, one religious and one secular.

First, let's look at conversion as an experience with inner conflict and its resolution. Scholar and pastor Paul Morentz defines conversion as a psychological phenomenon that resolves inner conflict (254). Typical, contemporary, Western conversion narratives do appear to re-enact a conflict experience: emergence of tensions, climax/turning point and resolution. On [iamsecond.com](http://iamsecond.com), there is a collection of videos in which Christians tell their personal conversion narratives. Rapper Jason Petty, or Propaganda, tells viewers about growing up as an African American in a rough Hispanic neighborhood and later a wealthy white neighborhood. He talks about getting beat up and chased home from school, feeling like he didn't fit in with his peers or his family and being interested in art and poetry. His inner conflict emerged as feelings of not fitting in or being who he was supposed to be. The climax of his inner conflict was a conversation with his father, who read him Psalm 139. Reading that Psalm about being fearfully

and wonderfully made stirred something in Jason and changed him. His new belief that God loved him and made him with a purpose resolved his internal conflict and led him to embrace his love of poetry and to begin rapping full time.

A pattern of inner conflict and resolution can also be traced in Deirdre McCloskey's secular conversion narrative, *Crossing*, which is a personal memoir about a journey from manhood to womanhood. Born Donald McCloskey, Dierdre recalls trying on women's underwear for the first time as an 11-year old boy and wishing at that time that he could be a girl. However, as he grew up and went to college, he wrestled with his desire to embrace femininity. As he cross-dressed and experimented with pornography on into mature adulthood, he continued to tell himself, "I am a fifty-three-year-old heterosexual cross-dresser, married thirty years, two grown children, a professor of economics and history. I don't want to be a woman" (49). His inner conflict manifested itself as a battle between the pressure to remain a man and his growing desire to become a woman. This conflict reached its climax one night while Donald was driving in drag. Donald bursts into tears when he realizes he not only truly wants to become a woman, but he actually can become one (51). In that moment, Donald's inner conflict was resolved and he pursued appointments and surgeries to become Deirdre. In one of the final chapters of her book, Deirdre writes about the effects of her decision to become a woman: "She sweats less...She likes cooking...She listens intently to stories people tell of their lives...She can't remain angry for long...People treat her more kindly...She cares about love" (255-260). The inner conflict that Donald experienced was resolved by his decision to become Dierdre and her conversion led to positive outward effects.

Second, conversion can be defined as a shift in “god-term,” which Kenneth Burke defines as that which an individual believes to be the ultimate ground or scene of all human action (Burke, *Grammar* xi). It is a core belief at the center of a person’s worldview that dictates how they see themselves in relation to the world around them. As such, it can be deduced from that person’s words and actions. A shift in “god-term” can be anything from a broadening of definition or a complete change from one term to a different term, but either way, it will have external effects on a person. We see a shift in “god-term” in both Jason and Deirdre’s stories. In Jason’s testimony, he recalls examining his experience in life saying, “Always, again, feeling like I don’t belong, whether I was born the wrong color, in the wrong neighborhood, in the wrong decade, to the wrong parents” (Petty). He recalls feeling like he didn’t fit in anywhere because he had different interests than the people around him. The “god-term” that can be deduced from his pre-conversion experience is the term *outcast*. After he talks about Psalm 139 and the impact of the verse, “You are fearfully and wonderfully made,” he says, “In the most intimate and personable way I can say this: Christ has...given me personhood.” *Personhood* is the new “god-term” that can be deduced from the narrative of his post-conversion experience. His conversion resulted in a shift of “god-term”, moving his understanding of himself from *outcast* to *personhood*.

Similarly, in *Crossing*, Donald continues to describe himself as a “heterosexual cross-dresser” leading up to his conversion moment in the car, saying things like, “What am I complaining about? I have a wonderful life. Though a man...I’m just a heterosexual cross-dresser...I don’t want to be a woman” (9, 15, 16, 49). The god-term that can be deduced from this is the term *cross-dresser*, which he closely associated with being a male heterosexual named Donald. In the moment of his conversion, Donald says, “Good Lord. I can become a woman...I am not a

heterosexual cross-dresser. All this time. I am a transsexual...I am a woman” (50-51). Donald’s words reveal a distinct change of “god-term” from *cross-dresser* to *transsexual*, which he closely associates with the term *woman* in this quote. In this particular example, the shift in “god-term” directly parallels what happens to Donald’s name and his physical body by the end of the memoir.

Defined as an experience with internal conflict and its resolution and as a shift in “god-term,” conversion encompasses Jason Petty’s religious experience and Dierdre McCloskey’s secular experience. When no longer limited to religion, conversion becomes a phenomenon that can be used to understand how humans undergo internal changes, both drastic and gradual. Within this thesis, conversion will be applied to understanding interpersonal conflict, a situation that requires some form of change from one or all parties involved.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **CONVERSION AND INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

In this chapter, my goal is to clearly show the relationship between a conversion experience and the experience of interpersonal conflict resolution. Although the truest test of this relationship would be a comparison between conversion narratives and examples of imperfect resolution, I want to use the clearest illustration. Since reconciliation represents a very successful resolution to conflict, it is the perfect starting point for understanding the relationship between conversion and interpersonal conflict resolution. Using the definition of conversion that I established in the previous chapter, I will show that reconciliation narratives also reveal an experience with internal conflict and its resolution, as well as a shift in “god-term.”

#### **Reconciliation as conversion**

In keeping with Fisher’s assertion that people understand and articulate their lived experience through stories, we will use narrative to understand the experience of interpersonal conflict resolution, specifically reconciliation. The reconciliation narrative told by Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel is a particularly powerful example. In 1993, 16-year old Oshea Israel killed Mary Johnson’s 20-year old son, Laramiun Byrd, and was sentenced to 25 years in prison for second-degree murder (“Mary Johnson”). During an interview with an organization called The Forgiveness Project, Mary describes how she initially felt towards Oshea, “Hatred began when I found out who had taken Laramiun's life...I'm Christian woman and I was just full of hatred...I viewed him [Oshea] as an animal...when we were going to court and I just wanted him to be locked up for the rest of his life” (ForgivenessVideo). Mary’s internal conflict emerged as an

incongruity between her Christian beliefs and her feelings of hatred toward another person. Ten years into Oshea's sentence, Mary read a poem about a conversation between two mothers, one whose son had been killed and one whose son had been a killer. In that moment, she felt that she was supposed to create an organization that would bring mothers of murdered children and mothers of children who had committed murder together to heal. However, in order to move towards that end, she needed to find out whether she had truly forgiven Oshea ("The View").

Reluctantly and with great difficulty, she decided to visit him in prison and it was during that initial meeting that their conflict with one another got resolved. At the end of their conversation during that first meeting, Oshea asked if he could hug Mary and she said yes. Mary describes what happened to her during this moment: "I began to feel something in my feet and it began to just move and it moved up and up and up until I felt this thing leave me. And I instantly knew that all the hatred, the bitterness, the animosity, the anger, I instantly knew that all that stuff was gone, that it was over with" (ForgivenessVideo). In a separate video posted on the website for her organization, "From Death to Life", she says, "I knew that it was over, that I had truly, truly forgiven him" ("From Death to Life"). That first meeting resolved Mary's internal conflict, as well as her interpersonal conflict with Oshea. From that day forward, Mary has pursued a friendship with Oshea, throwing him a party when he got out of prison and helping him adjust to everyday life. Today, Oshea lives down the street from Mary and they tell their story together in prisons, on television and in schools.

Through this narrative, we also see a shift in Mary's "god-term." In multiple interviews, Mary describes Oshea as "an animal," someone who needed to be locked away forever

(ForgivenessVideo; “The View;” “From Death To Life”). The god-term that can be deduced from these statements is the term *prey* or *victim*, which she closely associated with the idea of Oshea as an animal and her own feelings of hatred toward him. However, now when Mary talks about Oshea in interviews, she says, “He is my spiritual son,” and, “I treat him like my son. I talk to him like a son” (“The View”; “From Death To Life”). The god-term that can be deduced from these statements and from her behavior toward Oshea is the term *mother*. The resolution to Mary and Oshea’s conflict very obviously resulted in a shift in “god-term.”

In this conflict situation, the interpersonal conflict and the inner conflict were born at the same time, which is confirmed by Mary’s words: “Hatred began when I found out who had taken Laramiun’s life” (ForgivenessVideo). As soon as her conflict with Oshea began, the tension between her feelings of hatred and her Christian beliefs was born. Mary could not truly resolve her conflict with Oshea without resolving the tension between her hate and her Christianity. Her “god-term” also had to shift. She had to move from understanding herself as a *victim* into an understanding of herself as *mother*. In order to resolve her interpersonal conflict with Oshea, Mary essentially had to undergo a conversion, an experience with internal conflict and its resolution and a shift in her “god-term.”

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **CONCLUSION**

Though Mary and Oshea's reconciliation narrative is a radical example, it reveals distinct similarities between conversion and interpersonal conflict resolution. This raises the stakes of a conflict, because it shows that the inner state of a person must change in order to bring resolution. Our current conflict resolution methods should reflect this relationship between conversion and interpersonal conflict.

Narrative mediation, a current conflict resolution method that I mentioned in the first chapter, is a great place to apply this relationship for two reasons. First, mediation is a formal setting in which people tell stories for the purpose of fixing a conflict; it "allows clients the ability to tell their story in a setting that is safe and helpful for them" (Paquin and Harvey 170-171). In addition to this, "research suggests that...parties seek mediation in order to transform their negative interactions with the other party into positive interactions, to gain closure, and to let go of the bitterness and move on with their lives" (Harper 600). People not only get the chance to tell their stories in mediation, but they come to mediation seeking resolution. Second, narrative mediation, in particular, favors the community empowerment model over the problem-solving model of mediation. In other words, it focuses on the healing of a broken relationship rather than achieving a settlement. Research has shown that relationship-focused mediation methods, like transformative mediation and narrative mediation, not only lead to more emotionally satisfying results, but they help prevent societal injustice and power imbalances from being perpetuated by the conflict resolution process (Paquin & Harvey; Harper).

As mentioned previously in chapter one, narrative mediation is more concerned with the stories people tell about a conflict (i.e. – their perceptions of a conflict) than it is with the events or “facts” of a conflict situation. Therefore, the mediator is not working to uncover what actually happened; he is working with the disputing parties’ understanding of what happened in order to uncover their motivating cultural expectations and beliefs. The goal of narrative mediation is to deconstruct the conflict stories being told by both parties and re-write an alternative story that reconstructs that broken relationship and excludes the conflict situation. This process of deconstruction/re-writing serves to separate the people from the conflict and helps both parties move forward towards concrete resolution.

As effective as I believe narrative mediation to be already, it could be greatly improved by having each of the disputing parties tell a personal conversion story, a narrative of a time in which they experienced internal conflict and its resolution and a shift in their “god-term.” I realize that this is asking a lot of people who are in conflict with each other, but it would have two positive effects. First, it would prime the speaker for the type of change he or she will need to undergo in order to resolve the conflict. Peter Stromberg writes about the importance of telling a conversion story: “...For the conversion story manifests the same emotional themes and transformations that are said to have characterized the original conversion event. In order to tell the stories of their conversions, believers must talk about aspects of their experience that have profound meaning for them” (15). Telling a conversion story stirs up the emotions and powerful memories of the original conversion experience; in many ways, the narrative re-enacts this moment. For someone in an interpersonal conflict situation, this could serve as preparation for the kind of internal change that will be necessary for resolution.

Second, it would allow the listener to more deeply encounter the other person in a way that is unrelated to the conflict. The Parents-Circle Families Forum is an organization that exists to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians by gathering members from both sides to tell personal stories of hardship and loss (Furman 125). Dr. Frida Furman writes this about the work of the PCFF: “According to both Palestinian and Israeli members, encountering the other results in a shift of self-perception and relief from the experience of being victims” (137). A Palestinian man in PCFF confirmed this statement when, after hearing Israeli parents talk about losing their sons, he said, “You know, before we met you, we were very happy whenever we heard that an Israeli soldier had been killed; but now, after meeting with you...it will be harder for us to have this kind of happiness...because we know that they are your sons, just like we have sons” (129). The telling of personal stories leads to a powerful encounter with the Other.

Though part of the power of PCFF’s work stems from the fact that both sides are talking about mutual experiences, there is still a unique power in an unrelated conversion narrative. Dr. Gary Paquin writes, “If stories express the problem, but only parts of life experience are likely to be storied and given meaning, then examining the person’s stories and the elements which fall outside these dominant stories can open up opportunities for resolving conflict through providing greater understanding and more alternative solutions” (Paquin & Harvey 177). In an interpersonal conflict situation, the conversion narrative, which will most likely fall outside of the dominant conflict story, will lead to greater understanding of the other person’s life, as well as provide opportunities for alternative solutions to the conflict.

In conclusion, there is much to be gained from understanding interpersonal conflict resolution as a conversion experience. Resolution means that at least one of the disputing parties will change internally in some way, which adds gravity to even the most topical of conflicts. Conversion narratives provide great insight into how people undergo internal change and should be used as both a map for navigating interpersonal conflict and as a tool for disrupting the power of victimizing/villainizing discourse in conflict situations. When used as such, conversion narratives will help facilitate the inevitable internal changes that people must go through in order to resolve their conflicts with one another.

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